

**Peter Sandman**  
**Risk and Crisis Communications Workshop**  
**Sponsored by: King County Office of Emergency**  
**Management**  
**April 10-11, 2006**

The following are notes that Eric Holdeman, Director, King County OEM took at the two day workshop conducted by Peter Sandman. These are not complete, rather just some highlights. Peter has a wonderful web site with all his materials available at [www.psandman.com](http://www.psandman.com)

Risk Communications

There are two elements/scenarios.

- Risk that is real and you are trying to motivate people to take precautions
- Risk that is low, yet people are outraged

Risks that kill people and risks that upset people are different. There is no correlation between the two.

One old solution is to ignore the public and leave them out, because if you square with them it will screw you up. They are too dumb or ignorant to understand.

The new alternative is to involve the public. We need to explain the data better to them. We need to stop and speak in plain English and not jargon.

Giving facts to upset and outraged people will do you no good.

Most risk controversies do not have hard data. A fault tree analysis is typically used. Typically what happens at events is not what was displayed on pre-done fault trees. Risk=Magnitude + Probability is the standard method.

The new method is Risk=Hazard + Outrage. People overestimate the risk when the outrage is high. If the risks are high the public will normally modify their thinking so that they have a low outrage.

If the hazard is high and outrage is high, both experts and public will take it seriously, but for different reasons.

Are they upset because it is dangerous, or are they upset because they think it is dangerous? If they are calm because they think it is safe and you need to

motivate them (get them to be upset) if the danger is real. Generally people think it is safe because they are calm.

Outrage cannot be overcome with facts. Outrage determines the hazard perception. You have to concentrate on managing the outrage, while you still manage the risk.

One way to reduce outrage is to emphasize the voluntary nature of the hazard. If you want to motivate people then you need to make them feel coerced.

There is the fact that "Warning Fatigue" will set in when events don't play out. Warning fatigue sets in when the thing being warned about does not happen. Broad based warnings that are not specific as to "when" is not as serious an issue to warning fatigue.

Culture will radically impact outrage. For example, Yankees and Native Americans apologize differently. So culture does impact the methods but the principles are the same.

Outrage management is not solved by saying, "Calm down." In outrage management you do not have to keep it short. You also do not have to make it interesting. One of the things is for the people who were outraged to become bored with the topic. Therefore, for a public meeting most of the time should be spent in listening to people vent their outrage, not in making presentations to them on facts. Outrage management is primarily spent by listening. By your declining to talk allows them to get to the point where they demand that you speak. Then when you do speak, acknowledge what they said (active listening technique), not "I know how you feel."

Outrage management is nothing like precautionary advocacy. Know the issue and situation that you are dealing with.

People project their feelings and thoughts on others. If I'm worried, I want others to be worried with me and I will be thinking that "they" are worried too.

### Strategies of Outrage Management:

You can do some things to reduce and prevent outrage. It is better to reduce outrage by staking out the middle. Don't take the total opposite to the outrage. If they are giving you an "F" Grade, don't try to prove to them that you deserve an "A." Settle for the "B-."

Look for things that you can own up to and agree with their opinions. Look at the idea of "the customer is always right" attitude.

Yes, there are duplicate standards the public has about who is making the statement. People will allow “Green Peace” to exaggerate and allow them to do so, but if a company exaggerates, then they are culpable.

We look at our own distortion of facts not as lies, but see “Facts” that we believe lead to truth. It is the other side that is lying. Your job is to stake out the middle, even though your opponents are not doing so. This easier said than done.

There is emotional and intellectual reasons that keep you from wanting to do this. You need to do it, because it works! Higher ranking people in an organization will have more trouble in staking out the middle.

Doing the above may create outrage in your supporters who want you to exaggerate for their views. They don’t want you to be “fair.” They want you to lead the charge!

You need to “**acknowledge prior misbehavior**” that are not secrets. These are things that have already been revealed. When you blow the whistle on yourself it does 1/20<sup>th</sup> of the damage as when someone else divulges it. Trying to keep something secret is difficult to do, and not expect some damage. There is no middle ground on this subject. You should not bury the information on page 120 and not mention it at the news conference. This does not work in a high outrage environment.

The steps of forgiveness:

1. Admit you did it
- 1.5 Shut up while you get yelled at
2. Say you are sorry
  - Show regret
  - Show sympathy
  - Accept responsibility
3. Make it right
  - Compensation for the victims (don’t start here)
4. Make it right II
  - Promise to improve
5. Ask for forgiveness and do penance
  - Penance has to be useless, but humiliating to you

**You need to acknowledge current problems.** You need to bring in folks and interact with them who have been and are critical before there is an event so that they can see how you struggle with the issues that you are facing.

**Discuss achievements with humility.** Give away the credit to everyone else who is involved. Don’t make claims for the success you’ve had. Tell people that you are doing things not voluntarily, but because of laws, rules, regulations, etc.

People will believe that, but they won't believe that you did it voluntarily. Figure out who you want to give the credit to. Give it to someone or some organizations that needs a victory. If you want the changes being made to be credible, you need to give away the credit. Don't choose the path that make you feel good. Pick the path that makes the most sense for either profit or for your mission.

**Share control and be accountability.** When you share control, outrage goes down. Another compromise way is to be accountable. Let them be a "back seat driver" critiquing your performance. For example, if you are doing a study, include your protagonists in designing and supervising the study and working with the vendor. You do everything together! You give up the opportunity to cheat, and your opponents can't claim that you are cheating.

**Pay attention to unvoiced concerns and underlying motives.** Make sure you know what the real concerns are about. Is it a health issue, or are they really concerned about property values.

Outraged people don't want to win, they just want you to lose. Ego preempts outrage. You need to address the ego first before you do outrage management. You have to address ego, outrage and then greed in that order.

Outrage management is not complicated, it is simple, but counter intuitive.

Questions to ask yourself about precautionary advocacy:

1. Are you sure they are under reacting?  
-Denial and apathy are two different issues
2. Can you engineer the problem away?  
-Put in safety measures to manage away the issue
3. Are they ignorant?
4. Are they misinformed?  
-They have the answer, but they have the wrong answer
5. Do they know how to protect themselves, and do they know they know?  
-They may know how, but not feel like they have the knowledge or skill
6. Are they paying attention? (well known in private industry)  
-Train people to remind themselves to take a particular action
7. Is there a motivated inattention "problem"  
-Do they have reasons that they don't want to think about?  
-There are cultural differences. Some cultures believe that you are fated to have what happen, happen.  
-People don't want to be out of whack with what others are doing
8. Can you get them more outraged about the risk?
9. Can you get them less outraged about the precautions?  
-We have lots of experience with feeling over protected

-Does your message provoke a response that reminds them of their parents bossing them around?

### Crisis Communications

The rules of how to handle high outrage incidents do not apply in crisis communications.

#### Six Focus Areas for Crisis Communication

1. Information content: What do we know about this crisis? What do we want our audience to know?
2. Logistics and media: How do we reach our audience? CD ROM from CDC a good resource
3. Audience assessment: Who do we need to reach? What do they know, think, and feel already? Best work done by Carnegie Mellon University called "Mental Models."
4. Audience involvement: How do we solicit suggestions and feedback from our audience?
5. Metamessaging: How do we manage the non-information content of our messages, (how reassuring to be, how confident to sound, how to address emotion, etc.?) 80% of your message is about "how you tell me" versus on what you say.
6. Self-assessment: how will our own values, emotions and political problems affect our communications?

#### **Guidelines for Action in Crisis Communications:**

1. How Bad Is It? How Sure are You?
  - a. Don't over reassure! If you reassure, your credibility is on the line. It may very well undermine your ability to manage the crisis. If you over reassure, your audience will be less assured, they instead become fearful and unmanageable. When you reassure people, you will make them more fearful. Empty reassurance without details/facts will make people frightened. Warning fatigue is not as bad as you think it might be in people. Never say it is "safe." There is always a risk. The risk is never zero. After a crisis there will be criticism that comes. Expect it!
  - b. Put reassuring information in an alarming sentence. Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses.
  - c. Error on the alarming side! Don't worry about over stating the danger. You will naturally over-correct! Over reassuring does more and longer lasting harm! Your first communications about the crisis should be the most alarming. Your second communications would be "It is not as bad as we first thought." You do not want to have to come back and say "It is worse than we thought!"

- d. Acknowledge uncertainty. We are “making it up as we go along” said differently, “We are building the boat and sailing at the same time.” “We will learn things in the coming weeks that we will wish we had known before hand.” People make the mistake of sounding “too confident.” Go ahead and sound tentative. You use a confident tone to assert that you don’t know what you are doing. You are use to making it up as you go along. Replace the word “confident” in your sentence structure with “hopeful.” Saying “I don’t know” is great. Saying, “I wish I had the answer to that question” is even better. Expect some criticism for what you do.
- e. Share dilemmas. Crisis management is primarily about solving dilemmas. It is better to share the dilemma. Do it before you make a decision, which is best.
- f. Acknowledge opinion diversity. [This is a minority opinion that is Sandman’s]. Generally we believe that speaking with one voice is key. Acknowledging the diversity of opinion that was made before the decision builds support for the decision. Don’t try to present the image that there were not differences of opinions.
- g. Be willing to speculate. You have to use speculation if you are doing crisis and risk communications. You don’t want to “speculate” over confidently. You should sound not too confident. Over reassuring speculation is worse than over alarming speculation. Your speculation should tell both the least and worst case scenarios. Think about the Hurricane Warning Center and how they talk about the path of hurricanes as they forecast their movements.

## 2. Coping with the Emotional Side of the Crisis

- a. Don’t over diagnose or over plan for panic. Research has shown that panic is rare. If it does happen, it can be worse than the events they were fleeing. There is a significant difference between feeling panicky and panicking. On 9/11 people did not panic, but did feel panicked. In a crisis people generally behave better. People overcome their panic feelings. Elected and senior people may project their feelings of “panic” about how they will perform in response to a crisis onto the general population. Looking at Katrina, the issue was not that help did not arrive, but that “communications” did not arrive. Absent answers, they made things up. People behave poorly to a lack of information. You need to say something, even when you don’t have anything new.
- b. Don’t aim for zero fear. The spectrum goes from-to: apathy, interest concern, fear, terror which leads either to denial or fear. In denial you don’t do anything. Denial is an “under-estimated, under-stated” problem. You can use outrage to get people who are in denial to take action. There is a difference between apathy and denial. When people are not concerned, that is apathy. When people don’t want to “go there” are people who are in denial. **You want to move people “up” from concern to fear. It is at the fear level that people will take precautions. We**

- don't want to scare people out of their wits, we want to scare people into their wits.** You need to legitimize their fears, or you will send them into denial. Determination. You need to give people "things to do" so that they are occupied. Useful and not useful activities are helpful to help get people through an event. For example flying a flag is a symbolic behavior. Letting people volunteer and donating things is very helpful for them psychologically. For example, plan on using the people who have had the flu in the first stages of a pandemic and recovered to be put to work, and they will be motivated to do something. Give people choices of things to do. Give them things to decide. People are better able to bear their fear if they feel like they have some control. Best is to have three choices for people to do something. Love is another element to move people out of denial. Hate and anger are the last ones to move people out of denial. Don't criticize people for the precautions they are taking.
- c. Tolerate early over-reaction. There is a period of "adjustment reaction." You might pause and stop doing things that now seem dangerous. You become hyper-vigilant. You look around who is on the plane. You personalize the risk. You take precautions that are not necessary. These actions are in some respects a rehearsal for what you expect might happen to you. It is similar to what athletes do in order to become prepared for game day. People who go through the above process will go through an actual event better. People are working through the process to adopt the new normal. You can't get to a "new normal" without going through an adjustment reaction. Your goal is to help as many people as possible get through their adjustment reaction as possible before the crisis hits. This is not a "knee jerk" issue!
  - d. Establish your own humanity. The more stress a responder gets, the more ridged you will become. Therefore you might act less human. If you have emotions, let them show. Describing emotions is not the same as letting them show. Another way to express your humanity is to express wishes. Talk about yourself and where you were when the incident happened. Use personal pronouns like, you, me, I, we (people going through the event). You might share how your family is doing going through the crisis. Look the way you feel.

This was a wonderful two day workshop. The type of "advanced" training that emergency managers and communications/public information people want and need in order to continue to grow in their professions.